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"This, That, & the Other VIII"
Poets, Politics & the Temper of Our Times

Someone once told me never to start a business letter with the initial "I" – a good practice for a personal essay or whatever genre we assign these ***Book Notes***. So, seven words into the second sentence, I have started and stopped, stopped and started this ***Note*** multiple times seeking the right tone. At the moment, watching the Inauguration of President Donald Trump, I am in a sort of a "pox on both their houses" mood.

Exploring a "pox on both their houses," let's connect some ***Dots***.

Dot #1. Regarding a "pox on both their houses," because of its strategic and tactical incompetence, the Democratic Party, if there still is such a thing, combined with the hubris (or perhaps obliviousness) of former President Joe Biden brought us to this moment. It is a moment created by its failure to read "the temper of the times." If you want to win in electoral politics, there are a lot of things you need to do, but they all begin by understanding the "temper of the times" – what are people thinking, what are people feeling, and what are people seeking?

That brought me to the moment I contemplated beginning this ***Note*** by asking a sort of thought experiment question: "Is it possible that President Donald Trump is right about some things?"

I think the answer to that question is "Yes."

In two ***Book Notes*** in fall 2024 immediately after the election, we parsed electoral data and examined inflation, immigration on the southern border, and — to lump multiple issues together under the label — "cultural issues." It showed that Trump both sensed the mood and agreed with the vast right-tilting center of the electorate's attitudes toward "cultural issues." More importantly, he might have had a better grasp of the importance of artificial intelligence in America's future than any other front-page politician. His recent blunting of Elon Musk's influence by the new relationship with Sam Altman's OpenAI reveals the savvy hustler's understanding of competitive nuance.

In short, he understands the "temper of the times."

Which leads to another question: If he understands "the temper of the times," is he competent to deal with it?

Which leads to yet another question: Can his character meet the test of the times?

Contemplating that question did not improve my mood – a mood occasioned by images of the wannabe oligarchs surrounding Trump inside the Capitol Rotunda while his more passionate plebian supporters huddled outside in the cold. Hypocrisy — (probably not the right word) — underscored the contradictions of his entire agenda. Which raised other questions, chief of which is that while Altman might blunt Musk, can Trump reconcile either with Steve Bannon?

Colored by the inaugural images, my mood reminded me of the divide in American culture I have traced these past eight years in ***The American Tapestry Project***: that America is being broken by two competing visions, two competing versions of the American Story. On one side, it is the story of white exclusionists; on the other, the story of America's visionary attempt at self-government while ever expanding the meaning of "We" in its founding documents. Although there are innumerable subvariant issues, American politics is essentially about the ongoing struggle between those two visions. As I mulled over this latest turn in the American story's plot, I found myself going down one of those quirky digressions I enjoy exploring: "What have the poets had to say about politics and politicians?"

Dot #2. The dourness of my mood, I realized, was not unlike that described by W.H. Auden in the opening lines of one of the great political poems of the 20th century:

from September 1, 1939 *(Nb. For those whose grasp of history needs sharpened, Sept. 1, 1939 was the day Hitler invaded Poland launching World War II, in which over 50 million people died.)*

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night. [1]

The line "The unmentionable odour of death …" might strike some as extreme, but perhaps not considering the comments of Jacob Chansley, the QAnon shaman pardoned by Trump for his actions invading the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Upon his release, Chansley said, "I got a pardon baby … Now I am gonna buy some motha f*kin guns!!" [2]

While the pardoned might celebrate, it is the pardoner giving many people second thoughts. Apparently, it has captured the attention of U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., among others (U.S. Sens. Tillis, Collins, and Murkowski – Republicans all), who said, "no one should excuse violence. And particularly violence against police officers." [3]

Before you accuse me of being partisan, I also think Biden's last-minute pardons commuting death row sentences, his son Hunter Biden and other members of his family, and other political supporters for wrongs real and imagined strike me as problematic. In America's current political climate of threatened reprisals, however, they are perhaps understandable. For the record, although Hunter Biden was also a convicted felon, there is one difference between the two presidents' dueling pardons: the "January 6" pardons (is that a word?) included many convicted for attacking and wounding police officers. It is odd, or perhaps

not in the "Alice in Wonderland" atmosphere of our current political classes, for law-and-order spouting politicos to excuse those who abuse the police.

Dot #3. Pardons? Pardoners? While no money exchanged hands, as far as anyone knows (in these cryptocurrency times how far anyone knows might be a very short distance, indeed), and my mood soured, I recalled Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale" from ***The Canterbury Tales***. In our greed-soaked times, it seemed very apt. If you've forgotten it from high school English class, or never read it, the Pardoner tells a tale about three young men who set out to kill Death. Seeking Death, they encounter an Old Man and ask him where Death might be found. He points them to a tree, under which they find a cache of treasure. Deciding that they want it for themselves, they remain at the tree to steal the treasure during the night. Waiting for nightfall, they argue among themselves over portions, turn violent, and murder one another out of greed. They found Death, or, in a wonderful Chaucerian irony, Death found them.

Watching those wannabe oligarchs eying one another circling around Trump's head, one wonders who will be the first casualty? Musk has already dispatched Vivek Ramaswamy back to Ohio.

It is the character of The Pardoner, however, that most intrigues. In Chaucer, The Pardoner begins his Prologue by telling how he swindles people. Although it anticipates the Protestant Reformation by a century and a half, the Pardoner is a seller of indulgences. Indulgences were one way the medieval Church raised money. By buying an indulgence, one shortened one's own or a loved one's time in purgatory; it was a ticket to heaven, so to speak. It is one of the many errors of the Church that inspired Martin Luther to do, as he said, "I can do no other," and post his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg and turn the world upside down.

A Pardoner, then, was a corrupt Church official abusing his already dubious office by taking, as they might have said on "The Sopranos," a bit for himself. As the Pardoner says,

from The Pardoner's Tale

But let me briefly make my purpose plain;
I preach for nothing but for greed of gain
And use the same old text, as bold as brass,
Radix malorum est cupiditas. *Tr.: The root of evil is greed.*
And thus I preach against the very vice
I make my living out of – avarice …
Covetousness is both the root and stuff
Of all I preach. That ought to be enough. [4]

Substitute MAGA for the Church, which, like the Pardoner, President Trump seems to be using only as a ruse for his own ends (ask Bannon what he thinks of Musk and the other aspiring oligarchs) and you have as apt a description of our current leader's character as you might find. Unless it is Alexander Hamilton in Federalist No. 68 (March 12, 1788) who feared a man with "Talents for low intrigue and the little arts of popularity … who might be tempted to sacrifice his duty to complaisance for those whose favor was necessary (to acquire the office and succumb) … to cabal, intrigue and corruption." [5]

Dot #3. Which recollection got me thinking about another man with talents for low intrigue who caught a poet's eye – Zimri in John Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel." Once, a long time ago in what now seems like another life, I considered getting a doctorate in 18th century English literature. I loved the 18th century with its glimpses of modernity just around, it seemed, every corner. America is an 18th-century creation.

But it was one of the 17th century precursors whose rhetorical genius amazed me. John Dryden was one of the great poets of the era. This was before the Romantic Age when poetry became personal and consumed with how one deconstructed one's emotions. Dryden was of an earlier age when reason reigned.

It was a time when poets were major public figures who shaped the tone, and as they used to say, the temper of their times. Some poets and authors were "pens for hire," like modern-day political campaign consultants. Dryden was tasked with making the recently restored King Charles II legitimate in the eyes of a largely skeptical if not hostile public. In "Absalom and Achitophel," Dryden defends the return of the exiled Roman Catholic King Charles II as the protestant Cromwellian interregnum collapses. In addition to his Catholicism, Charles II was a notorious rake (an old word for a promiscuous womanizer). Dryden somehow had to excuse Charles II's moral failings and discredit his enemy Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury.

In the long poem's justly famous opening lines, Dryden transformed Charles II's vices into virtues. In a Bible-soaked culture, Dryden dispatched the moral issue by casting Charles II as the Biblical King David:

from Absalom and Achitophel

In pious times, e'r Priest-craft did begin,
Before *Polygamy* was a sin;
When man, on many, multiply'd his kind,
E'r one to one was, cursedly confin;
When Nature prompted, and no law deny'd

Promiscuous use of Concubine and Bride …[6]

Truly, when thinking of President Trump's character, Stormy Daniels, and the Access Hollywood tapes, there is nothing new under the sun. Regardless, Dryden proceeds to condemn Charles II's adversary Shaftesbury by describing the corrupt followers with whom he surrounds himself. One is Zimri, of whom Dryden writes:

from Absalom and Achitophel

Rayling and praising were his usual Theams;
And both (to show his Judgment) in Extreams;
So over Violent, or over Civil,
That every man, with him, was God or Devil.
In squandering Wealth was his peculiar Art;
Nothing went unrewarded, but Desert. [7] *"Desert" = merit.*

Think about the current roster of cabinet nominees and all those other scramblers after royal favor, the Zimris of our time.

Dot. #4. Seeking to lighten my mood, I wondered what else the poets might make of our current time. Since it's the 21st century and Silicon Valley tycoons are ascendant, I used one of their creations and googled "What are the best political poems in the English language?" One can argue endlessly about which are the best, but, it turns out, there are loads of them. I was a bit surprised at the mini-deluge. I might do a ***Book Note*** sorting through them, but for now in the interests of brevity, I want to note three: two I knew and one new to me.

The two I knew included Shelley's often-cited meditation on what Samuel Johnson called the "vanity of human wishes." Given their humility-challenged characters, I doubt in their current euphoria either President Trump or presidential-surrogate Musk would get it.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said – "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. … Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away." [8]

The other one I knew was by Langston Hughes. Although some might argue for James Weldon Johnson or Paul Laurence Dunbar, Hughes was the first great Black American poet. He grew up in neighboring Cleveland and graduated from Cleveland Central High School. His favorite teacher, who inspired his love of literature, was Helen Maria Chestnutt. She was the daughter of Charles Chestnutt, who is usually considered the first important Black American novelist. Charles Chestnutt was an early member of a very old Cleveland bibliophile society to which I also belong. So, with that oblique connection in mind, I have always appreciated Langston Hughes.

Hughes, of course, is a major American poet from the first half of the 20th century. He does not need any connection with me to justify his reputation. In his "Let America Be America Again," Hughes exhorts America, as Martin Luther King Jr. did in his last speech, "to just be true to what you said on paper." Hughes, like King, loves America and only wants it to be the America of the Founders' promise and vision. As Hughes says,

from Let America Be America Again

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed –
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above. [9]

Dot #5. My mood mellowing reading Hughes, I decided to end on a positive note. The poem, but not the poet, new to me was "One Vote" by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. We met her in August 2022's ***Book Note #112*** about summer poems, which included her "The Woman Who Turned Down a Date with a Cherry Farmer" in Fredonia, New York. At the time, Nezhukumatathil was a professor at SUNY Fredonia.

Her poem "One Vote" clicked with me for several reasons. First, Nezhukumatathil is the daughter of immigrants. She understands the promise of America that Hughes sings about. She is also one of America's finest younger poets. In a future ***Book Note,*** I will examine her recent collection ***Oceanic.*** More importantly, "One Vote" clicked with me because over the past year or so, I have been researching, writing, and presenting about the 19th century birth of the women's movement and the suffragists' campaign for women's right to vote. Just this past December, my wife Judy and I saw "Suffs" on Broadway, a very fine musical about the final push to pass the 19th Amendment, which is key to Nezhukumatathil's "One Vote."

It also clicked with me because as I noted in two ***Book Notes*** just after the presidential election while Trump's victory was beyond dispute, it was neither a landslide nor a mandate. It resulted primarily from the Democrats' failure to do the most basic thing in electoral politics: get out the vote. Why that happened is beyond this ***Book Note***, but if one of the reasons was that a large number of people thought their vote didn't matter, Nezhukumatathil's "One Vote" will disabuse them. One vote counts, and a series of one votes can add up to a lot of votes.

Lastly, the poem signals a note of hope, for while people wonder what one person can do, Nezhukumatathil points out that one person can change the course of history. The 19th Amendment was passed when approved by the state of Tennessee. The Tennessee legislature was deadlocked until one young member listened to his mother and voted for women's right to vote.

<u>One Vote</u>
After reading a letter from his mother, Harry T. Burn cast the deciding vote to ratify the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

My parents are from countries
where mangoes grow wild and bold
and eagles cry the sky in arcs and dips.
America loved this bird too and made
it clutch olives and arrows. Some think
if an eaglet falls, the mother will swoop
down to catch it. It won't. The eagle must fly
on its own accord by first testing the air-slide
over each pinfeather. Even in a letter of wind,
a mother holds so much power. After the pipping
of the egg, after the branching – an eagle is on
its own. Must make the choice on its own
no matter what it's been taught. Some forget
that pound for pound, eagle feathers are stronger

than an airplane wing. And even one letter, one
vote can make the difference for every bright thing. [10]

I've always said explication can kill a poem, but my mood brightening, I draw positive energy in our ambiguous times from Nezhukumatathil's last line: "One vote can make a difference for every bright thing." Channeling her inner Gandhi, I think she means us to understand that "we must be the change we wish to see in the world." In our time, then, resist resignation, re-engage and work for what Abraham Lincoln called "the last best hope of Earth," the America of our Founder's vision. And, quoting Michah 4.4, George Washington's vision of America as a place where all "shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid." [11]

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"President Donald Trump's Inauguration, 2025" at **PBSNews** available here accessed Jan. 24, 2025.

End Notes

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